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ABSTRACT

This paper reports efforts at Central Missouri State University to broaden student teachers' perspectives using field experiences in urban charter schools. Early childhood teacher candidates were required to spend at least two days in an urban charter school kindergarten class. The first day was spent observing and helping teachers and/or children as needed. The second day was spent preparing and teaching a developmentally appropriate lesson to small groups of children. Participants reflected on this experience via an electronic discussion board. Overall, they were shocked by the unfamiliarity of what they saw in the schools (e.g., direct instruction and lack of display of children's work). Five major themes emerged from their reflections: environment, classroom teacher, students, curriculum, and instruction. Comments about the environment and instruction were generally negative, though the respondents were positive about the children. Comments regarding the classroom teachers depended upon which teacher was observed and varied from very positive to very negative. At the end of the semester, after having taught a lesson to kindergarten students, student teachers reflected on their teaching experience and compared their first and final reflections. Using the same themes, the study found that respondents were generally positive about the teaching experience. (SM)

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Incorporating Urban Charter School Teaching Experiences in Central's Early Childhood Education Curriculum Course

Teachers make the difference in educating young children. Central Missouri State University's (Central) conceptual framework emphasizes our mission of educating caring, compassionate, competent teachers for ALL children. Likewise, Goal 4 of The National Education Goals stated "By the year 2000, the Nation's teaching force will have access to programs for the continued improvement of their professional skills and the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to instruct and prepare all American students for the next century" (The National Education Goals Panel, 2001, p.3). Thus, teacher educators need to provide early and diverse teaching experiences for teacher candidates if teachers are going to be prepared to teach ALL children. Central encourages field experiences in urban charter schools to broaden Central Missouri State University (CMSU) students' perspectives and better prepare them to meet the needs of future students. This action research paper reports students' reactions, limitations, and recommendations for field experiences in urban charter schools.

Teacher candidates need opportunities to acquire knowledge and skills to teach a diverse population because teacher classroom behavior has a great effect on student academic achievement. Teachers need to be competent to teach diverse students, so all the students will be successful. Comer and Maholmes (1999) reported that recruiting, preparing, and supporting excellent teachers is the most important strategy for ensuring that all America's children receive an adequate education.

As important as knowledge and skills are teacher dispositions, such as compassion and a caring attitude. Literature suggests that it is important for teachers to get to know their students, focus on students' positive traits, believe in students' abilities, and show students respect if the students are to achieve to their utmost potential (Arroyo, Rhoad, & Drew, 1999). If teacher candidates from rural, small town, and suburban backgrounds are to understand and respect all students in their class, teacher educators need to provide opportunities for diverse field experiences. Consequently, Central Missouri State University faculty has forged partnerships with teachers in urban Charter Schools in Kansas City in an effort to insure early childhood teacher education candidates' field experiences take place in school environments with diverse populations of kindergarten students. In the spring 2001 semester, early childhood teacher candidates were required to spend at least two days in an urban charter school. The first day was spent in observation and assisting the teachers and/or children as needed. The second visit, the candidates prepared and taught a developmentally appropriate lesson to small groups of children

Teacher candidates need to be prepared to teach a growing diversity of students if we want them to consider teaching in urban schools. Each year there is a growing diversity in our school population and an increasing need for teachers in urban areas. In 1991, the most comprehensive report on the growing diversity of the student body in U.S. schools reported that by 2006 nearly 50% of the students would be nonwhite and Hispanic (Garcia, 1999, p.20). However, in a survey of teacher candidates only 18% of those surveyed said they would even consider teaching in an urban school system (Jones & Sandidge, 1997). In addition, Jones and Sandidge (1997) reported "teachers who feel

comfortable in urban, multicultural environments appear to be much more supportive of and sensitive to the needs of their students" (p. 7). Likewise, teacher candidates that have only had field experiences and student teaching in exemplary classrooms with favorable environments are not prepared to perform successfully in challenging classrooms like those in many urban schools (Jones & Sandidge). Thus, it is important that appropriate teacher preparation in culturally diverse urban schools is crucial to success with diverse school populations. Because as stated by Irvine (1999), "If you don't know anything about what they [students of color] know, then how are you doing to teach them about making linkages?" (p. 3). Irvine goes on to say that teachers need to use examples and metaphors that make sense in the students' cultural repertoire and that culture can be learned (1999). Culture can be learned by studying, reading, visiting, meeting people and talking to people from the culture. Therefore teacher candidates need opportunities to learn culture of diverse students.

Arroyo, Rhoad and Drew (1999) reported "studies have shown that it is important for teachers to communicate understanding of cultural diversity among students" (p. 3). Therefore, it is plausible that teacher candidates need experiences with diverse students in order to understand and appreciate cultural diversity. The early childhood curriculum course at CMSU has required observation and teaching experiences for a number of semesters but most of the teacher candidates have chosen rural, small town, or suburban areas for their early field experiences. During the spring semester of 2001, in an effort to at least introduce the teacher candidates enrolled in the Early Childhood Curriculum Course to an additional area of diversity, they observed kindergarten classrooms in an

urban charter school and then worked with a partner to create an appropriate lesson to teach to a small group of kindergarten children.

The teacher candidates reflected on their first experience at the charter school via an electronic discussion board. Not only did they report and reflect on their own experiences, they responded to points and concerns raised by fellow classmates. Overall, the teacher candidates were shocked by the unfamiliarity of what they saw in the charter schools during their first visit (i.e. direct instruction, lack of display of children's work). The five major them emerged from the comments and reflections of the candidates and could be categorized as follows: environment, classroom teacher, students, curriculum, and instruction. General comments by the teacher candidates included the following:

(1) As we drove up to the school, it did not look like an elementary school.

(2) I felt intimidated because of the strict environment.

(3) I was amazed at the diverse backgrounds of the students.

(4) Coming from a very small town, I never realized the world was so diverse.

(5) The children were wonderful and that was the best part of the day. They gave me hugs, wanted to hold my hand, and just needed someone to be there with them.

(6) I was exposed to the realities of the different levels of abilities in one kindergarten room as I saw more than one student who did not recognize the alphabet by name or sound and some children who were reading books.

Overall the comments about the environment and instruction were negative but all candidates were positive about the students. The comments regarding the classroom

teachers depended upon which teacher was observed and varied from "all the teacher did was scream at the children" to "the teacher was very warm and welcoming."

Finally, at the end of the semester, after the teacher candidates had taught a lesson to the kindergarten students, they reflected on their teaching experience and compared their first reflection with their final reflection. Using the same themes to compare the first and second experiences of the candidates, it was concluded that the teacher candidate responses to the teaching experience were generally positive. The teacher candidates were much more comfortable and positive about teaching. One reason for this was that they had been to the school at least one time prior and they were teaching and interacting with the children in a manner in which they had been trained, i.e. using hands-on, active learning, constructivist instruction. Examples of their reflections follow:

(1) I originally did not want to go back but I am glad we went and I think it was a good experience for myself as well as the kindergartners.

(2) I enjoyed the experience with my children and wish that I could have had more time with them.

(3) My reaction to our teaching visit was one of pleasure and enjoyment.

(4) I never saw one child that was not having a very good time in our centers.

(5) The children were well behaved and wanted us to come back again to teach a lesson. They gave us hugs when we left.

Research shows that early field experiences better prepare teacher candidates. In addition, early field experiences in urban settings better prepare teacher candidates to successfully teach in diverse settings because it is important to help them construct new learnings about issues of race and poverty (Murtadha-Watts, 1998). However, there are

difficulties associated with providing all teacher candidates with diverse teaching experiences. Many teacher candidates have jobs and commute an hour or more to campus therefore scheduling difficulties and time conflicts arise. Also, some teacher candidates are resistant to the idea of teaching in urban schools and want their field experiences in comfortable/familiar settings.

In conclusion, while a few visits to an urban charter school alone are not enough to prepare teacher candidates to teach in urban settings, it provided the candidates with an opportunity to experience a different, diverse teaching situation first-hand. Teacher candidate reflections, video recorded teaching, and charter school kindergarten teachers' input will guide planning for future urban charter school observation and teaching experiences that will be incorporated into early childhood courses.

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